

A Sermon for the
6th Sunday after Pentecost
July 12, 2009
Texts: Amos 7:7-14
Mark 6:14-29

“And the LORD said to me, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A plumb line.’ Then the LORD said, ‘See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by;...Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, ‘Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words...And Amaziah said to Amos, ‘O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is the temple of the kingdom.’” Amos 7:8, 10, 12-13

“King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, ‘John the Baptizer has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him.’ But others said, ‘It is Elijah.’ And others said, ‘It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.’ But when Herod heard of it, he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.’ For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, it is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, ‘Ask me whatever you wish, and I will give it.’ And he solemnly swore to her, ‘Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.’ She went out and said to her mother, ‘What should I ask for?’ She replied, ‘The head of John the Baptizer.’ Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, ‘I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.’ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and his guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl.” Mark 6:14-28

This gospel story today is strange. After a statement about Jesus’ growing fame and what some people were saying about him, he was Elijah returned, or one of the ancient prophets come back to life, or he was John the Baptist raised from the dead, Mark mentions that even Herod, the ruler of Galilee and Perea had even heard of Jesus and wondered also if he might be John the

Baptist reborn. For he had had John arrested and beheaded. John had obviously ruffled Herod's feathers and paid the ultimate price for it. Now here was Jesus creating a new stir with all of his miracles and preaching, and Herod's already thinking here comes John again. The message is only barely veiled. Danger is lurking for Jesus, which we all know very well proved to be true.

But then Mark goes into this strange aside, this flashback that is the bulk of today's gospel. Sharing this account of the strange circumstances surrounding Herod's giving the order to carry out John's execution. The anger over John's response to Herod's taking his brother's wife. Nothing like the anger of the powerful caught in a scandal. The occasion of Herod's birthday and the banquet he throws for his courtiers and officers and leaders. A special dance offered by Herod's daughter that elicits an unbelievable response, "I'll give you anything, even half of my kingdom." That a little too much wine was involved comes to mind. But then, the occasion does provide a glimpse into Herod's character, when saving face easily overrules justice in regards to John's life. Maybe the episode could be titled "Lifestyles of the Rich and Powerful." Herod's daughter asks that John's head be delivered to her on a platter. Kind of like the last course in their multi-course banquet. Not to be embarrassed by renegeing on his promise, request granted.

When read as a stand alone story, taken out of context, it is quite bizarre. It is only in its context that Mark's purpose for using it begins to make it understandable. Right before it Mark tells about Jesus' commissioning his first twelve apostles as his agents to take his message throughout Galilee. He orders them to travel humbly, taking nothing except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money, and only one tunic, forgoing all signs of wealth and power so as to make the proper impression when delivering their message, the kingdom of God is near, good news to the poor, the sick, the outcast. He warns them they may encounter opposition, towns that will shun and reject them. Just take it in stride. Just knock the dust of that town off your feet and move on. And off they went, preaching, casting out many demons, and anointing many who were sick and curing them.

But opposition there will be to your message, to the signs of the kingdom you bring. And almost as a special emphasis to that point, Mark, at this point, inserts today's story. Just look at the case of John the Baptist. He resolutely brought his message, spoke words that the rich and powerful found offensive, and look what happened. However, he did not falter, he gave himself completely to his message. John's commitment foreshadows what Jesus himself will give. John the Baptist was the forerunner, preparing the way of the Lord. He did so in every way, not just in announcing that someone greater than he was coming, but in his being steadfast in speaking the truth to power, and his willingness to accept the price. Jesus will do the same, and before he does, he will teach his disciples that they too will be expected to deny themselves, even "lose their life", for the sake of the gospel. And in doing so they will find life.

Immediately following Mark's report about Herod's birthday banquet, he reports about the disciple's triumphant return. They gathered around Jesus once more and told him about everything they had accomplished. They had worked hard and now Jesus invites them come away with him to a deserted place for a well-deserved rest. But when they arrive at that supposed "deserted" place, low and behold there is already a huge crowd waiting for them. Seeing the crowds, Jesus had compassion on them, for they seemed like sheep without a shepherd. And he and his disciples ministered to them, healing many, teaching, until late in the

day. They then realized that here they were in the wilderness with this huge crowd that surely was getting hungry. But what were they to do about it. Send them away to villages to find food? “No,” Jesus says, “you feed them.” And what follows then is the feeding of the 5000. The miracle of God’s abundance, heaven’s banquet laid out for the poor. And that is what the vast majority of those who sought out Jesus were, poor. In contrast to Herod’s banquet, Lifestyles of the Rich and Powerful, stands the feast of the kingdom that accompanies Jesus, a feast of good things for ALL people.

There is challenge, and promise, that comes with trying to live a gospel life. The promise is that God’s abundance, of love, of compassion, of forgiveness, of strength and courage, will always be with us. The challenge is that there will be hard choices to be made, to live and act in ways that sometimes may conflict with what the world favors, making choices other than ones we would find more comfortable and easy. For instance, when someone we know is being slandered by gossip, or unjustly treated in some way, to speak up, speak the truth, defend them, or, avoid conflict or controversy and just keep quiet. Every Christian is continually faced with such small choices, to act according to our faith, or some other way.

And all Christians are faced as well with a choice to “speak the truth to power.” To speak out and name injustices that exist in our society, and advocate for action to end them. There are plenty of them, from persistent, and increasing poverty, to the lack of readily available health care for many. The church has employees whose job it is to be advocates, to be the church’s voice speaking the truth to power, in offices on public policy in many states and in Washington. But the truth is that it takes the persistent voice of us all speaking to the wielders of power to bring enough influence to bear to effect change.

We are continually challenged to live faithfully by always learning and discerning what the gospel of Jesus Christ has to say to the world, and then be bold in living and acting faithfully in both the day to day context of our lives, as well as the larger context of our society. For following Jesus is to go an alternative way, live in ways that stand over against the norm. Our faithfulness in following the alternative way surrounds us with the gifts of the promise - God’s love, hope, peace - enabling the kingdom to come in and through us, and takes another step toward transforming the world. And hopefully, along the way we won’t lose our heads. Amen